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## THE ETERNAL CHUCKLE

"Good Master Raymund Lully, you look wise.  
Pray correct that error."

If it were not for the ministrations of the chuckling race the literature of the world would be but a sad pasture: just as the world itself, were it not for its occasional merry hearts, would be dismal as Tophet and life "but an old song." These kindly folk that gad about chuckling when most are dour and glum cannot be too fondly praised. Mostly they are amiable and gentle fellows who tickle our frailties and prod us where the flesh is proud. But at their best they are dauntless and magnificent men-at-arms, knights-errant in the universe, who war with wit as stiletto or rapier, humor as battle-ax, for the immaculate truth. To the world, smugly content and primly serious in its delusions, to the man of the world, as grave in his petty commonwealth of gold or glory as the trilobite in its primeval mud, comes the chuckler:—

"The gravest beast is an ass; the gravest bird is an owl;  
the gravest fish is an oyster; and the gravest man a fool."

We can discern in the literature of the world three types: There are those who cry out with Saint Paul "The world passeth away and the lust thereof." There are those who sputter with mad Simon Eyre, Lord Mayor of London "Ha! ha! A mad world! A mad world!" And there are the "passionate and melancholy multitude" of poets who sing with the dead and buried Elizabethan—

"Lend your ears to my sorrow,  
Good people that have any pity."

Though their sorrow be the same sorrow that comes to us all, no different. In brief, we may discern those who, looking at it critically from far off, despise, condemn, or renounce the world—refuse to take it at all; those who take it as a jest; and those who take it "to heart."

The greatest of these, of course, are the saints and the sages. Plato will be with us when Sappho and Pindar and Æschylus and

Aristophanes are no longer dreamt of. Confucius will be moulding human lives when Li Po, who died drunk, is a wraith in history. And Jesus Christ and Gautama Buddha will remain when much of the world has withered away. The greatest of all are the saints, the "Way-showers." And the poets have their place. But what of the merry men? What of these Voltaires and Molières and Rabelaises who laugh till the world's end?

Humor, as has been said this thousand year, is sanity. The humorist stands for the sanity of the universe. He is the higher critic.

Human life, as an end in itself, is vain. We need not go to the sages to learn that. We can look out the window at the stars and learn it well enough. "Broken hearts," exploded dreams, unremembered faces—all that is very petty against eternity. The greatest individual tragedies are microscopic, ultra-microscopic, against time that has been and that will be,—and nothing, "nothing in the world," against that greater and timeless being within us which knows nothing of yesterday and to-morrow. And man's joys are as vain as his pains. The jelly-fish, too, like the louse and the humble-bee, has his sorrows and delights.

Man should remember this. Yet he does not. The poet—the representative man—reproduces for him his world and his emotions. He intensifies, sublimates experience. He makes the broken heart more broken and the blithe heart blither. If he has suffered, he intensifies his agony in sonnets and ballads and songs to the harp; if he has won delight of life, he twitters like a bird. But he is careful to emphasize ever that all this is somewhat. To the poet his love affair is the only thing in the world; his broken heart towers more gigantically in his dreams than *Ætna* or the *Jungfrau*. It is all very serious, all very important. (The weakness of the poet is that, like Pompey the Great, he cannot take a joke.) He glorifies human sorrows and human delights. And man with his poets to sing him asleep goes about the world, if he be disappointed, solemn as an owl, or, if he be but pleased, merry as a grasshopper, vain and loud of mouth. His sorrows crush him and his joys make him drunken.

He becomes, then, engrossed in self. He considers the universe from the axle of his individuality like the fly in the fable which perched upon the axle of the chariot and made such a fluster. The eternal ideals of the God that made the world, of the Mind that underlies the world, he forgets. And in their place he sets up his own petty gods of convenience, his own personal ideals—of avarice, of ambition, of pleasure and vain-glory. His moral system is his own invention. He models it to suit himself, as he would design a frock-coat or select a cravat. His social structure, being fashioned by one who has lost all sense of perspective, is a crotchety, whimsical palace of unsubstantial dream, thinner than air, built upon false foundations, and mortared with unabiding clay. It is illogical, a catalogue of contradictions, ridiculous and absurd. Yet he presides in it grave and solemn as the King of Babylon. He calls it all very good, grows proud. And he reigns in his palace of dreams with great pomp and importance until after a time when the joke is old the monstrous humorist, Death, brushes him into oblivion like an insect.

Thus is man in the world. But, by some divine and never-too-much-to-be-praised dispensation, the Spirit of Comedy comes periodically chuckling through creation to make him hesitate and consider himself. The Spirit of Comedy comes whispering into his ear that his shams are after all but shams, and that his glory is after all but vain-glory. It comes telling him that his petty gods of convenience are merely so many mud idols, and laughable ones, to boot. This is salutary. Next to the saints and the prophets who point out to man the right path to salvation are those who show him he is upon the wrong. And these men, in whom the Spirit of Comedy is manifest incarnate, must needs catch his ear with laughter, or he would not note them at all. No more than he notes the saints.

To the King of Babylon comes the harlequin who hints that the Kingdom of Babylon is but a house of cards, that even the death of the King of Babylon is somewhat of a jest. To the grave ass who bows so punctiliously to his gilded gods of convention—to the philistine who serves up so solemnly his steaming incense to his golden calves—to the poet “allured or en-

chanted with these transitory things under the moon"—to these comes the humorist, saying, like the king in the play in whom defeat and disaster had awakened the cosmic sense of humor: "Cover your heads and mock not flesh and blood with solemn reverence."

He fences laughing, but the point drives home.

"Saint Hieron, out of a strong imagination, being in the wilderness, conceived with himself that he saw them dancing in Rome; and if thou shalt either conceive or climb to see, thou shalt soon perceive that all the world is mad. . . ."

The Spirit of Comedy becomes incarnate periodically, as comets come, and the succession of the seasons. It is an unfortunate generation indeed which does not have its great ironist, or satirist, or humorist. The world has been graced from the beginning by a magnificent hierarchy of laughter which stands shoulder to shoulder with the philosophers and the poets and the saints, a little below the angels,—a splendid cohort of warriors, clad in that invincible mail of irony or laughter, who have warred eternally upon human vanity and human delusion and human hypocrisy, showing man, if not what a god he may be, at least what an ass he is.

Democritus, Aristippus, Menander, Aristophanes, Lucian, Juvenal, Plautus, Terence, Martial, Boccaccio, Rabelais, Montaigne, Cervantes, Molière, Butler, Burton, Fielding, Smollett, Addison, Steele, Swift, Sterne, Voltaire, Lamb, Thackeray, Dickens, Keller, Richter, Heine, Meredith, Mirabeau, Bret Harte, Mark Twain! One can imagine their "very dust—

"a-laughing

For thinking of the humorous thing called life."

And there are those great laughers of to-day—Shaw, Chesterton, Anatole France.

If there has been a finer chuckle incarnate in nature since Noah was a sailor than this same Anatole France, I know not who he was. His quiet laughter is a sword of flame. His humor is as powerful as a battery of artillery, though it is silenced and subdued. There is no man has such mastery of irony as he has: "*The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the*

*rich, as well as the poor, to sleep under bridges, to beg bread, and to steal."*

The bastions of human vanity stand most often firm against the onslaught of righteousness; to the dour Puritan and the howling dervish they offer a breast of steel. But they crumble at the onslaught of laughter, and their defenders scurry away.

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